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ABSTRACT

Since the mid-1970s, at least 20 states have instituted standardized tests that must be passed before students can receive a high school diploma. This paper draws on data collected in four states to explore some of the lasting effects of competency test legislation. Of particular interest is student awareness of these tests. A survey of 733 students and interviews with nearly 60 educators and administrators provide information about test impact. The states studied were two with the lowest reported graduation rates (California and New York) and two with the highest reported graduation rates (Virginia and Utah). One urban, one rural, and one suburban school district were chosen from each state, with a focus on students in grades 9 and 11. Over half the sample was in a college preparatory track. Blacks comprised 16%, Hispanic Americans comprised 12%, and Asians comprised 8% of the sample. Student awareness of competency testing policy was low, at about 50%. Black, Hispanic American, and Asian students were somewhat more aware of the requirement, with about 70% knowing they faced a graduation test. Parents almost completely ignored the graduation test. It is suggested that such a test will not contribute to student performance through motivation or diagnostic mechanisms if students are not aware of it, or do not care about it. An appendix contains five tables of survey data. A 15-item list of references is included. (SLD)

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CSE Technical Report 320

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Since the mid 1970s, forty states have mandated standardized testing in their public schools and at least half have instituted tests that must be passed before students can receive a high school diploma (Goertz, 1989). In the words of an academic observer, this movement embraced the common signal that finally the schools would "mean business" when it came to promoting and graduating students (Jaeger, 1982). The principal legislative sponsor of California's testing scheme claimed, "I have found that without standards and the accountability provided by sanction, students become contemptuous, teachers become demoralized, and schools increasingly lose credibility with taxpayers" (Hart, 1978).

In addition to cheers that the diploma once again would be worth more than the paper it is printed on, an outpouring of reservations accompanied the advent of these exit hurdles. Cautions were raised about the effects of these "high stakes" tests on curriculum—the tests would drive and narrow what was taught—and concerning their differential and invidious impacts across pupils of differing cultural backgrounds (e.g., Jaeger & Tittle, 1980; Serow & Davies, 1982; Serow, 1984a , 1984b).

Initial boasts and doubts alike regarding the effects of gatekeeping competency testing have met with a paucity of follow-up research. Perhaps in a final analysis, the promoters of competency tests will be shown to have harbored no interest in results because of their privately held doubts about the ensuing tests or because of their subsequent preoccupation with other issues. Certainly the few reported diploma sanctions have caused many to suggest that the exit testing reform was toothless. But for whatever reasons, scholars have not beat a path to the exit test issue. In recent testimony to this, the extensive search reported by Ellwein and Glass (1987) found only 11 citations claiming any empirical assessment of competency testing effects. Only one work reported to date has bothered to ask students any questions about these tests (Haertel, Ferrara, Korpi, & Prescott, 1984).

This paper draws on data collected in four selected states to explore some of the lasting effects of competency test legislation. We were particularly interested in the importance assigned to this test by the students themselves, since it is toward their levels of learning that competency tests are publicly directed. We conducted part of this probe with a very simple question at the center: Are the students at schools which require a test for graduation aware of this requirement? A pupil testing reform touted to have an important effect on student competencies at least should be visible to the students. For data on this question, we relied on project staff-administered surveys completed by 733 students in 4 states and 7 different schools. We also drew on our interviews with nearly 60 educators and testing officials in the schools and systems serving these students, particularly assessment coordinators, principals, and counselors whom we asked to assess the effects of their graduation testing program on students and their parents.

We undertook this research amidst mounting suspicion that reforms such as graduation competency testing may constitute political exercises and are not educationally motivated (Ellwein & Glass, 1987). The formation and legislation of such standards may be responses by officials to their need to appear responsive to public concerns. What happens years later in the schools is of little consequence, unless of course what actually happens foments yet another surge of public concern. The suspicion that mandated reforms may suffer transformations from their advertised structures in the long run also derives from a substantial body of work on policy implementation. This research suggests that local preferences and deeply seated routines are extremely difficult to deflect through the adoption of state or district policies. The competency test reform seems aptly amenable to local reshaping (e.g., Cohen, 1987; Farrar, DeSanctis, & Cohen, 1978; Berman & McLaughlin, 1978).

The principal results of this study may not surprise readers. When students were asked whether they would have to pass a test or tests in order to graduate, only about half knew this to be a requirement, even though it was firmly entrenched in all schools in our sample and despite the fact that more than two-thirds of the sample students already had taken all or part of the test and had "received" their results. The educator interviews present a view compatible with these low levels of student awareness. In sum, principals, counselors and test officials report that the graduation test had receded from general salience, even though the programs were still regularly administered. Finally, student awareness was more variable across school sites than across any other variable; the school's specific arrangement for administering and reporting these tests appears to be an important factor in how visible they remain.

Student Awareness of Graduation Tests

Rather than concentrating on published state reports describing their testing systems or on published data describing student performance, we probed educators and students themselves about their experiences with these tests. We first asked educators about student and parent responses and views regarding graduation tests. Then we asked a large sample of students about their experiences with these tests and linked these responses to an array of related questions concerning each individual's school performance, schooling context, aspirations, and family background.

The sample. Table 1 (see Appendix) provides information about the states considered and chosen for the study. We began by identifying all states reporting four or more years of experience with a required graduation test (N=10). This qualifying condition would yield school systems where the test had been around long enough to have accumulated some more settled effects. Table 1 lists the 10 candidate states along with selected data about their test and high school graduation rates. We canvassed state testing directors in each of these states and found that only nine states remained qualified for our study; one state, Vermont, had repealed its previously announced graduation test. We obtained complete interview records from six of the state testing directors.

We chose four states from this list for more intensive study: the two states with the lowest reported graduation rates (California and New York) and the two with the highest graduation rates (Virginia and Utah). This selection was made chiefly because of our interest in linkages between competency testing and school leaving, reported previously (Catterall, 1989). For this analysis, the selection has several implications: (a) The representation of low-graduation-rate states and urban schools generally adds significant numbers of minority students of various backgrounds to the sample and (b) we attained a sample in which half the districts used a state-developed test and half a locally-developed test for the diploma. These aspects of the sample are explored further.

Within each of the four states, we selected three school districts at random for further study, beginning with our interviews. To represent a broad base of school and student experiences reported, we stratified districts and selected one urban district, one suburban district, and one rural district in each state. Within each district, we conducted interviews with the district test coordinator and at least two high school principals and two high school counselors.

The student sample was generated by securing agreements for follow-up visits from seven of the principals and counselors interviewed. We chose to focus on 9th and 11th graders for this phase. Ninth graders would have early experiences with graduation tests in many of these schools, and 11th graders would be more seasoned by their experiences, including failure and re-testing for some.

In each of the seven schools visited across the four states, we attended a minimum of five classes. For these visits we secured enough time to explain the study, administer a questionnaire to students, and conduct a follow-up discussion of the project. We insisted on surveying at least one remedial class in each high school—where possible a class that was assembled to help students prepare to retake the minimum competency test. We also asked for one honors class at each school. The remaining classes represented a full range of 9th and 11th grade topics and students. Topics included English, machine shop, history, home economics, and mathematics.

We intentionally and unintentionally tipped our student data collection efforts toward the urban schools in this study. By design, we wished to amply represent large city schools, because the greatest concerns about graduation testing had been aimed at low achievers and minorities (these pupils are more concentrated in the nation's urban centers). Three schools visited were in this group. We also found that class sizes in our sample's urban schools were larger than those in suburban or rural schools. Even more students in our final sample represented larger cities.

Table 2 shows statistics describing the attained student sample (N=733). Age and grade statistics reveal a rough balance between 9th and 11th graders. Self-reported class grades averaged a B-minus level, with substantial variance. Black students constituted 16 percent of the sample, slightly more than the overall representation of blacks in the nation's schools. Hispanic youngsters accounted for 12 percent, almost half-again more than their national enrollment shares. Asians constituted about 8 percent of those studied. Just over a third of the students reported were in a general track, about one-tenth in a vocational track, and more than half in a college preparatory track. Five percent of the students reported having failed all or part of a graduation required test and 10 percent reported passing the test on a second or later administration. Fourteen percent indicated that there was at least some possibility that they might leave school without graduating.

Instrumentation and Procedures

Our protocol for interviews with test coordinators, principals, and school counselors included questions concerning student and parent reactions to mandatory testing for high school graduation. Interviews were conducted by telephone and typically required 45 minutes. Notes and direct quotations from the interviews were transcribed to disk, and a printed summary of all 58 interviews contains 143 single-spaced pages. Classification and organization of interview responses were facilitated by the use of a high-powered text-processing program (ESP, System Resources Inc.).

Our student survey instrument incorporated newly crafted and established items. Several student background and performance items mirrored those employed in the national *High School and Beyond* survey (United States Department of Education, 1984). We also replicated student test-related opinion items from a previous study of competency tests by Haertel et al (1984). For this study, we concentrate on which students in our sample report awareness of their school's requirement of a test or tests for graduation.

As sketched above, the student survey was administered in classrooms under standard conditions by project staff—either the project director or the primary research assistant. Students were informed that the study was designed to fill an important gap in research on competency tests: our lack of knowledge concerning student views and experiences with such policies. The students were not told

whether they already should have taken such a test (about 70 percent already should have taken all or part of the test), nor whether their schools even required one (all schools in the sample did require a test for the diploma). We wanted to know how the students themselves would answer such questions.

Our 58 educator/policy maker interviews were held with those in favorable positions to be aware of the impact of required graduation tests on high scholars. One group included the administrators and coordinators of the tests who might report on or direct us to any data generated by their systems. Another included high school principals and counselors who must deal directly with large numbers of students and parents on questions of satisfactory progress toward the diploma.

Student Reported Awareness of Graduation Tests

The student surveys contained printed instructions to students that also were read to each class surveyed. These instructions stated, in part, the following: "We are particularly interested in tests that may be required before you can receive a high school diploma, sometimes called graduation tests." A section of this survey was headed, "Please tell us about your school's graduation test or tests." One item in this section of the survey (responded to by 729 out of 733) asked the following question: "Will you have to pass a particular test in order to graduate?" This sequence of questioning leading up to the final response item is the basis of our assessment of how aware students were of these policies. Recall from the above discussion that all schools in the sample required a test for graduation and that a majority of students in the sample had already taken all or part of their school's test. Yet we found that large numbers of students were not aware of this requirement.

If granted an assumption that students pay attention to survey instructions in research of this sort, we believed at the outset that we may have alerted students to the possibility that such a test existed in their schools. If any upward bias in reported student awareness was thus generated, the implications we draw from the partial cognizance reported below may be understated.

Table 3 shows distributions of student responses to the question, "Will you have to pass a particular test in order to graduate?" Overall, only 51.8 percent of students said yes, although an exit test was required of all students and almost 70 percent had already taken the test. We present various bivariate perspectives on student awareness in Table 3. Older students are considerably more aware of the test requirement, by about 20 percentage points between the 9th and 11th graders. We might presume that older students accumulate more knowledge about their schools and may have peers who are beginning to reach a point of failure to graduate because of a test not passed. There are no appreciable differences between males and females in our sample.

Pupil race/ethnicity shows significant associations with test awareness while reported individual academic performance does not. About 70 percent of Blacks and Hispanics report knowing that a graduation test is a requirement, while only 41 percent of white students report this. Students whose classrooms were described by principals as remedial were substantially aware of the test (67 percent versus about 50 percent for general track and college preparatory classrooms). Yet student self-reported grades associate little with awareness of an exit test policy, nor does the report of having repeated an earlier grade.

We also grouped students according to whether their respective tests were developed by the state or by the local school district, and by whether the students resided in one of the high graduation rate states (Utah and Virginia) or low graduation rate states (California and New York) in our sample. The resulting figures are shown in Table 3. In our attempts to interpret the evident differences, we

noted the differential rates of awareness between individual schools within states (see Table 5). It became clear that our design would not support conclusions that there were systematic differences caused by state-level test policy differences, or by state-level experiences with school-leaving behavior.

We proceeded to examine the effects of student graduation test experience. We replicated the student responses shown in Table 3 for a more restricted, test-experienced population of students. For this, we employed the subsample of students (N=50) who at the time of the survey administration already should have taken their school's exit test. The results of this exercise are shown in Table 4. An overriding pattern is evident in comparing Table 4 with Table 3, namely that experience with graduation tests is not associated with higher awareness of their existence. In our sample schools, test-experienced students displayed generally less cognizance of such policies than the students. In the test-experienced group overall, 46.8 percent expressed awareness of their school's graduation test requirement in contrast to a 51.8 percent awareness level for all students.

Our school-level data helped to explain the contraindicative awareness difference between test-experienced and non-experienced students. The non-experienced students removed from the analysis used for Table 4 in contrast to Table 3 heavily represented one school (School 3, Table 5) that had very high levels of awareness among all of its students. This suppressed the awareness percentages reported in Table 4. But school level analysis also showed that even within our schools, experience with a test does not contribute to awareness of its administration.

The generally low levels of student cognizance of their schools' exit testing policies, in concurrence with interview results described below, reflect what we have come to describe as a sort of "testing blur" in our high schools. From the student viewpoint, standardized tests come and go with regularity, students passively participate knowing that their course grades will not be affected, and what it's all about is someone else's business.

Across-school variation. Table 5 displays student awareness statistics for the seven schools in the sample. Certain implications of grouping schools by type for potential purposes of analysis are evident in this table. Two schools from different states, numbers 3 and 6, had high percentages of students reporting awareness of their exit test requirement, 71 and 77 percent respectively. Two other schools, numbers 4 and 5 from the same state, showed the lowest levels of student awareness, about 34 and 30 percent. If individual schools transmit the importance of these tests to students differently, an alternative and larger sample would have to be attained to characterize state types as to their possible influence on the student awareness of these tests. As noted above, we cannot draw inferences regarding the influence of the policy origins of the test nor of a state's overall problems with dropout behavior on the salience of exit tests to students.

Educator Reports of Student and Parent Views

In our interviews, we asked state and district test coordinators, school principals, and school counselors about student and parent responses to their required exit test. We also asked these educators to distinguish their reports for low versus high achievers in their schools or systems. The following themes characterize the responses we received.

Decay of interest. Many respondents reported that the issues embroiling graduation testing had subsided markedly over the years. The numbers now being denied diplomas because of non-success with a test were ranging between negligible and none. Whereas parent groups had organized to voice concerns surrounding the

formation of these policies, few later rose up to challenge the implemented tests. The rare parent with a 12th grader held-up in June by a test failure was the sole exception. "We don't hear from parents until one week before graduation," stated one district test coordinator.

Apathy of higher achievers. We uniformly heard that students who are doing well in school consider the enterprise a waste of time, if they consider it at all. The expressions "joke," "ritualistic," "another chore," "just another test," and "don't know it occurs," inhabit our interview files. One principal said, "The term 'Mickey Mouse' comes up a lot to describe our test."

Low achievers—divergent responses. Some of our respondents described low achieving students as extremely passive on the topic of the test that they might have trouble with; having difficulty with things at school was pretty routine for many students and there was no call for a fuss over yet another unpleasant experience. Many low achievers drop out long before 12th grade, and trouble with these tests is hardly a graduation-or-not issue for these students. But failing may help dissuade students from staying in school (see Catterall, 1989).

Counselors were the only group who cited instances of student anxiety over the tests, which they observed while conferring with students about their progress (or its lack) toward their diplomas. One lamentable comment by a school principal concerned the parents of low achievers and their interactions with the test: "The kids who score the poorest usually have parents who don't care."

Overall, educators seemed to feel that students and parents largely ignore the graduation test. It seems to be a ritual by virtue of its regularity, but a ritual without rite. Whether taken, passed or failed, little note of the exam is registered by many or most students. This lies in sharp contrast to sponsor Hart's (1978) report of high schooler sentiments as his bill was signed into California law: "I am surprised at how many recent high school graduates tell me that proficiency standards would have motivated them to do a better job in school." The effect of time on graduation test policies has not ratified expectations of maturation, such as this of McClung (1978): "A lengthy phase-in period not only allows for necessary curricular and instructional changes, but also gives students adequate notice that failure to learn can have severe consequences."

Conclusions

Our main conclusions are rather straightforward. High school student levels of awareness of competency testing policies are generally low, averaging about 50 percent. Having taken all or part of a test is no guarantee that a student knows what the test was for (or even whether he or she took it), despite the fact that the schools we examined had required the tests for at least four years. For those students who are attuned to the test, it is considered a joke by the already successful, and just another perhaps painful chore for academic strugglers. Black, Hispanic, and Asian students had comparatively high awareness of exit test policies; about 70 percent knew they faced a graduation test. Parents were reported to be almost completely silent on the topic of the competency test.

These observations strongly suggest that the visibly debated competency test has retreated as a school policy to the point of immateriality to educators and students. This evolution is consistent with the suggestion of Ellwein and Glass (1987) that the targets of competency testing reforms are the electoral constituents of politicians; the tests are targeted neither to the practices of schools nor to the educational progress of students.

We cannot on the basis of our data suggest that specific school conditions support or detract from the salience of competency testing policies, nor are we prepared to claim that the salience of the policy to students per se is a good or bad thing. We have suggested that if a graduation test is ever to contribute to student performance through motivational or diagnostic mechanisms, it might be advantageous for students to know about the test, its use, and its meaning. Large shares of students at all performance levels are not aware of exit testing policies in their own schools, which raises doubts about any such educational contributions.

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Appendix

Table 1

Original Candidate States for Interviews
And Student Surveys
With Selected Statistics/Descriptors

State:	1984 Grad. Rate:	First Class Tested:	Who Sets Std?	Grades Tested
NY	.62	1979	State	8-12
FL	.62	1983	St/local	8,11
CA	.63	1979	St/local	10 +
AZ	.65	1976	St/Local	8,12
NV	.66	1982	State	9,11
NC	.69	1980	State	9,11
DE	.71	1981	State	11
VA	.75	1981	St/local	10-12
UT	.79	1980	St/local	11,12
VT	.83	1981	State	10-12

Source: Digest of Education Statistics (1986). NCES, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Table 2

DESCRIPTION OF STUDENT SAMPLE

N	733	
	Mean	s.d
Age	15.34	(1.26)
Grade	10.11	(1.07)
SES (5 point scale)	3.07	(1.35)
Dropout peers? (3 point scale)	1.43	(0.72)
Grades (9 point scale, 1=4.0, 9=0.0 GPA)	3.38	(1.63)

	Percentage
Black	16
Hispanic	13
White	52
Asian	08
Native American	04
Unreported Ethnic/Race	07
Vocational track	09
General track	35
College preparatory	56
Ever repeated a grade	18
Failed graduation test	05
Failed then passed gtest	10
Might drop out of school	14

Table 3

Student Responses to the Survey Question: " Will you have to pass a particular test in order to graduate?", by various co-statistics, entire sample (N=733).

Respondent Grouping		(N)	Percentage answering: Yes	No	Not Sure
Entire sample:		(733)	51.8	5.5	42.7
Grade level:	8	(1)	100.0	0.0	0.0
	9	(322)	45.3	6.8	49.4
	10	(57)	45.6	0.0	54.4
	11	(295)	57.6	5.8	36.6
	12	(55)	63.6	1.8	34.5
Gender by grade: (primary sample grades only)	9	M	42.4	7.6	50.0
		F	49.0	6.0	45.0
	11	M	58.1	6.1	35.8
		F	57.5	5.5	37.0
Student Track: (school characterization)	General	(377)	49.1	3.4	47.5
	Remedial	(88)	67.0	1.1	31.8
	Advanced	(268)	50.7	9.7	39.6
Student-rept'd program:	Coll. prep	(385)	49.6	8.1	42.3
	Vocational	(69)	55.1	4.3	40.6
	General	(241)	53.1	2.1	44.8
Race/Ethnicity:	White	(382)	41.1	6.8	52.1
	Black	(116)	69.8	5.2	25.0
	Hispanic	(87)	71.3	1.1	27.6
	Asian	(57)	66.7	3.5	29.8
	Native Amer.	(42)	42.9	7.1	50.0
State vs. Locally Developed Test:	State	(258)	57.4	7.0	35.7
	Local	(475)	48.8	4.6	46.5
High vs. Low State HS Graduation Rate:	High Grad Rate		40.6	6.4	52.9
	Low Grad Rate		63.8	9.9	26.2
Achievement:	C+ or better	(561)	52.2	7.0	40.8
	C or worse	(158)	48.7	0.6	50.6
Earlier grade repeat?	Yes	(119)	52.1	1.7	46.2
	No	(564)	52.5	5.9	41.7
By self rept'd graduation chances:	Certain		52.9	6.0	41.1
	Less		44.8	2.1	53.1

Table 4

Student Responses to the Survey Question: " Will you have to pass a particular test in order to graduate?", by various co-statistics, test-experienced sample only, (N=500).

Respondent Grouping		(N)	Percentage answering: Yes	No	Not Sure
Entire sample:		(500)	46.8	7.6	45.4
Grade level:	9	(153)	30.1	13.1	56.9
	10	(26)	26.9	0.0	73.1
	11	(295)	57.6	5.8	36.6
	12	(55)	63.6	1.8	34.5
Gender:	Male		44.7	8.7	46.6
	Female		49.6	6.6	43.9
Student Track: (school characterization	General	(250)	49.2	4.8	46.0
	Remedial	(46)	56.5	2.2	41.3
	Advanced	(202)	42.1	12.4	45.5
Student-rept'd program:	College prep	(285)	47.0	10.5	42.5
	Vocational	(41)	53.7	4.9	41.5
	General	(152)	45.4	3.3	51.3
Race/Ethnicity:	White	(302)	38.1	8.3	53.6
	Black	(67)	68.7	9.0	22.4
	Hispanic	(43)	74.4	0.0	25.6
	Asian	(31)	64.5	6.5	29.0
	Native Amer.	(25)	28.0	12.0	60.0
High vs. Low State HS Graduation Rate:	High Grad Rate		44.0	5.6	50.4
	Low Grad Rate		62.7	5.2	32.0
Achievement:	C+ or better	(401)	48.1	9.2	42.6
	C or worse	(93)	40.9	1.1	48.1
Earlier grade repeat?	Yes	(61)	45.9	1.6	52.5
	No	(400)	47.3	8.0	44.8
By self rept'd graduation chances	Certain	(441)	48.5	8.2	43.3
	Less	(55)	34.0	3.0	63.0

Table 5

Student Responses to the Survey Question:
" Will you have to pass a particular test in order to graduate?",
by sample school and origin of test.

Test origin, state I.D. and school I.D.			Percentage answering: Yes	No	Not Sure
State Developed Test					
St#1	School 1		49.4	17.7	32.9
#2	School 2	*	48.1	3.9	48.1
#2	School 3	*	70.6	1.0	28.4
Locally Developed Test					
#3	School 4		33.8	2.2	64.0
#3	School 5		29.5	15.2	55.4
#4	School 6		77.3	1.6	21.1
#4	School 7	*	54.5	0.0	45.5

* Schools in which 9th graders had not taken exit test yet.
All remaining schools had "test experienced" students.